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Points of Contention: Oddities, Delicacies, & Monstrosities

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Points of Contention:

Oddities, Delicacies, & Monstrosities

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Points of Contention, an MFA exhibit, features fifteen works of relief-printed images from carved linoleum and layers of type printed with antique letterpress wood type. The work constitutes a visual exploration of dissatisfaction and disenchantment presented through the context of odd stories in the news and major current events, such as election politics and the closing of Hostess bakeries, as well as, NSA data collection and gun violence.

This supporting thesis explores the conceptual and physical processes of creating the pieces, including researching other artists who have wrestled with similar topics and produced their own unique reaction and resolution through art. The paper also discusses the technical and mechanical side of the artistic process, especially the anachronistic attraction to the methods of letterpress and printmaking in a digital age. Finally, this thesis chronicles the artist's sources of inspiration from cartoon monsters and brand mascots during childhood to letterpress printmaking.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From my earliest memories, I recall being drawn to type and the allure of creating some sort of art piece. I worked for hours at a small desk equipped with a chalkboard, writing and rewriting letters and numbers. Having learned to read at an early age, I could recite the alphabet forward and backward before age three and also became fascinated by magnetic letters, moving them around to spell words on the refrigerator. A favorite toy from my preschool years was a plastic school bus, which I still own, that carried 2.5" tall, three dimensional capital letters, not cut as typical children's building blocks with type characters on the side of the cube, but cut as three dimensional letters themselves, in a typeface I would later learn to be Eurostyle Bold. I credit these letters with providing me my first experience of holding a letter in my hand, feeling its form and structure, and brainstorming about building three-dimensional words.

Another early fascination involved monsters, especially cartoon monsters from Saturday mornings, such as the villains from *Scooby Doo, Where Are You*! or the heroic monsters featured on *The Herculoids*. Then later, after I learned to read, came my introduction to comic books and the characters of Marvel comics. I was instantly attracted to artist and co-creator Jack Kirby's rendition of The Thing, The Human Torch, and the Hulk, heroic figures saddled with a monstrous appearance. Even today, I continue to be intrigued by Kirby's drawing style, how his characters seem to embody kinetic energy as they move across the pages of *The Fantastic Four*, *Captain America*, and many others.

As a bonus to the artwork and stories, comic books also featured advertisements that intrigued and inspired. Mysterious and magical products, such as x-ray specs, sea monkeys, magic kits, and monster masks, were yours as long as you had the money. Strangely, however,

the advertisements that forever imprinted on my brain were always located about two pages from the end of the comic. These were full-page ads for Hostess snack cakes and fruit pies drawn as if they were actual comic pages, featuring a superhero fighting off an outlandish villain who wanted to claim the Twinkies, cupcakes, or another processed delicacy as his or her own. The hero would then defeat the villain, return the Hostess products to their rightful owners, and, in the last panel, receive his just reward by eating the snack.

As with the comic ads, brand mascots during the 1970s for products such as snack cakes, breakfast cereal, or candy appealed to my preschool-age self. The anthropomorphic characters of Twinkie the Kid, Frankenberry, Boo-Berry, and the Kool-Aid Man made the otherwise interminable trip to the supermarket with my mother an exciting adventure. I would be allowed to stand in the cereal aisle while my mother completed her shopping and stare at the brightly colored boxes covered with cartoon mascot salesmen from Tony the Tiger to Toucan Sam and the Trix Rabbit. The appeal of the boxes also included their brightly colored type, brand logos, and much anticipated free prize at the bottom of the box.

But at home my artistic endeavors mostly involved crayon and paper. Not usually allowed to buy coloring books, I had to draw my own images, which more often than not became an exercise in drawing comic book characters. I once even attempted to create an entire scroll, many feet long, depicting every super hero I knew. In addition to comic book characters, I chose store products and package designs as the inspiration for my drawings. The ICEE frozen drink, available during the 1970s at my hometown Kmart, was a favorite and revered subject, so much so, that I included in almost forty years later in *Always on Defrost.*

As my parents witnessed my interest in and devotion to drawing, they eventually allowed me to take art lessons from a private teacher. It was during this time that I learned how to use

charcoal, water color, and basic drawing fundamentals and built up my skills significantly enough to enroll in advanced art courses in middle and high school, even attending a fine arts high school for three hours each day during my junior and senior years in high school. But despite all of these educational opportunities, instead of engaging in "serious" fine arts pursuits, I just wanted to study comic book art, and most of my practice and energy in drawing was devoted to copying and studying it. While Jack Kirby remained a significant influence, especially in the early formative years, I would later recognize John Byrne, Paul Smith, and Bill Sienkiewicz for their major impact on my drawings. Eventually the foundation that I had received from these great artists led to drawing courses that centered around commercial art, and it was through these that I knew I wanted to pursue some sort of career in commercial art.

After high school, I took one year of courses at Furman University, but 1990 was a pivotal time, as the field of graphic design transitioned to all computer-based design. Since Furman had yet to make the switch, I transferred to East Tennessee State University and was introduced to computer-aided design and typography. As in my childhood, I was especially drawn to type. I would study type catalogs and magazines such as *Communication Arts*, *U&lc*, and *Print*. Around the same time, I started working at the copy franchise Kinko's, where I learned how designs could be produced and printed through digital technology.

During the first year of graphic design study, I experienced some concerns about design work, especially whether it could be as "exciting" as the work of my beloved comic book artists. I wrestled with questions such as, "Is graphic design just all serifs, or Helvetica, or the creation of boring ads?" Fortunately, as I began to read *Communication Arts*, I discovered ads and paper sample books designed by Charles Spencer Anderson for French Paper Company. Anderson's work was not boring, but unique. It was infused with snide and ironic humor and seemed to

somehow embody that same off-kilter, magical quality found in those odd comic book advertisements. I would later learn a label for this style: “retro” design, using the visual aesthetics, type styling, and printing methods of former eras. Seeing Anderson’s work further solidified my commitment to a career in graphic design and completion of a Bachelor of Fine Arts in graphic design at East Tennessee State University. I began work as a professional designer right after graduation and spent the next fifteen years at various advertising agencies, designing ads, print collateral, logos and identities, websites, and other materials for a diverse array of businesses and institutions from Fortune 500 companies to local tourism organizations.

By 2010 creative restlessness and the desire to teach led me to seek new sources of professional development, and I enrolled as a graduate student in the Department of Art and Design at East Tennessee State University, even though I had only a vague idea of the direction I wanted to take with my artwork. I had been successfully working in the advertising industry as an art director for over fourteen years, receiving numerous awards and the recent publication of a logo design as part of a design book series. I had dedicated years to producing design work for clients, but during the day-to-day routine of making complicated artistic and visual decisions at work, I had stopped creating artwork for myself. I designed solutions to marketing problems but had all but abandoned the thought that I could create art that was more than just a response to someone else's communication challenge.

But during those years of artistic drought, there was still a creative longing inside me that began to stir through a serendipitous encounter with old-school printmaking in a bookstore. In 2002 while browsing through the art book section at an outlet store in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, I stumbled upon *Hatch Show Print* by Jim Sheraden, Elek Horvath, and Paul Kingsbury, and this book became my introduction to letterpress printing and Hatch Show Print, the famous and

historic Tennessee letterpress printer. According to author Lemony Snicket, sometimes "…it is easier to hope for serendipity than to look for a precise answer" (120). This proved true for me as the discovery of letterpress would eventually provide me with the artistic solution to questions I had yet to ask.

I first visited Hatch Show Print in 2004, and the influence of the posters I saw and purchased filtered into my commercial design work, especially for my local Tennessee clients. Six years later, in the summer of 2010, I viewed the Kartemquin Films documentary, *Typeface*, about Hamilton Wood Type Museum in Two Rivers, Wisconsin. This film told the history of Hamilton Wood type, the struggles the museum faced, and the importance of preserving wood type as a vital part of American graphic design history. Aside from the beautiful prints and specimens shown at the museum, two scenes in the film stood out to me. The first introduced the Post Family Artist Collective in Chicago, a group of artists who design and maintain websites by day, including the site of then presidential candidate Barack Obama, but at night print using type and a letterpress, just for the love of it. The second important part of *Typeface* involved Purdue University professor Dennis Ichiyama explaining why the physical act of holding wood type leads to a better understanding of graphic design.

> Just using your index finger, doing the design on the screen, there's something lost. The computers are so fast. And they can generate 20 sketches in ten seconds. But a lot of it starts to look alike. They don't do as much on the computer than if they were doing it by hand, cutting the letters out and playing with them. The students that I brought up to Hamilton [Wood Type Museum], they see the space between the letters, they see the space within the letters, because they handle the letter that was almost six or seven inches. And they can actually grace the edges of

> the letter. And I find that they're not giving up the computer while they're back here. It's just that I think that it gives them the option of saying, "okay, I need to think about this design, this layout a little bit more so maybe I'll slow down." And I think the result is a stronger design. (*Typeface*)

Through viewing this documentary, I discovered a purpose and medium for making my own art again with design and printmaking processes, and these would lead to the creation of the artwork for my MFA show *Points of Contention*: *Oddities, Delicacies, & Monstrosities.*

As a complimentary written piece to *Points of Contention*, this thesis will further define and undergird the exhibit by exploring both the conceptual and physical processes of creating the pieces. To address the conceptual side of the process, I will be researching other artists who have wrestled with similar topics and created their own unique reaction and resolution through art. For the technical and mechanical side of the artistic process, I will be exploring the somewhat anachronistic attraction to the labor-intensive methods of letterpress and printmaking for producing graphic design works in a digital age.

CHAPTER 2

LETTERPRESS IN A DIGITAL AGE

With my first visit to Hatch Show Print in 2004, I discovered a new way to envision design and typography. I bought as many posters as I could afford and spent hours studying them and admiring the design concepts as well as the physical processes that had created them (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Hatch Show Print: High Powered,
Hand Printed. 2013. Letterpress. 23.25" x 14.5".

More than anything else, I was attracted by the slight imperfections from accumulated damage on the lead or wood type and the inadvertent texture that embossing caused through the printing process. The influence of Hatch Show Print combined with the inherent aesthetics and design qualities unique to letterpress, including the process for locking down the type, the texture from

wear, and the antique typeface choices, began to make its way into my professional design work.

As previously mentioned, in 2010 I found additional inspiration from the *Typeface* documentary and the Hamilton Wood Type Museum. I became obsessed with researching and learning all I could about letterpress printing, from its terminology and jargon to the presses and typefaces themselves. As part of this information-gathering phase, I attended a printmaking workshop at Hatch Show Print in March 2011, sponsored by the Nashville chapter of the AIGA. Jim Sherraden, artist, manager, and curator of Hatch Show Print, allowed a dozen people, myself included, to use some of the wood blocks for the day. He described the day as "therapy for designers"- meaning that we would get to use our hands in a 550 year old printing process as opposed to working at a computer all day. I found myself enamored by the process and an environment that housed a seemingly infinite historic collection of letterpress type and art.

Sherraden, in an interview with the *Knoxville News Sentinel* said, "We're providing a graphic design look you can't get with digital design. The computer is the best thing that ever happened to us" (Snyder). He was, of course, referring to the aesthetic qualities of posters printed by a letterpress, such as embossing and the imperfections of the type. But the unique qualities of the letterpress look are not just achieved by the press and the type but also by the fallibility of the human printer. For example, if the blocks are inked by hand, there will be variations dependent on the amount of ink rolled. Imperfections can also occur due to changes in pressure on the press from varying heights of wood type, sometimes caused by humidity, or how the original type block was cut. But David Jury cautions, when speaking of the role of letterpress printing to a younger generation, that ultimately "…it is not the medium itself that encourages a sense of adventure, but the attitude and approach of the tutor, which, in turn, influences the expectations of the student" (136).

As I discovered more about letterpress, I began to question why designers like myself, who were taught and trained to create design work digitally on the computer, were so attracted to the low-tech printing methods of letterpress. After attending his lecture at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, I posed this question to Jim Moran, the new director of the Hamilton Wood Type Museum. Much like Professor Ichiyama from Purdue, he felt it was the ability to handle the materials. By looking at the blocks of wood type and arranging the type by hand, designers are more connected to the reasoning behind techniques they take for granted on the computer. For example, when the printer has to increase leading or letter spacing, users must insert reglets between the lines of type or each letter. This tactile experience with type then informs the designer when he or she returns to the digital process. Book designer and author David Jury refers to it as a "multi-sensory learning experience" and, in addition to the weight and texture of the type, includes its smell as a defining factor (134). Simon and Jenna Hipgrave, owners of The Hungry Workshop, started out their careers as graphic designers but moved to letterpress; "the reason we started out in creative careers in the first place was because we liked making things, but it felt like that process of making had been lost along the way due to technical advances and the immediacy of digital" (Williamson 79). Jim Sherraden also feels that the allure of letterpress today is related to its existence as a physical process. "I have come to the conclusion that we are, as humans, hard-wired for 'process,' and we are discontent with the work done for us in this screen-saturated society" (White 67).

In the creation of the work for *Points of Contention,* I experienced this firsthand. As a digital designer since 1991, I feel invigorated to be so physically connected to the artistic process through using letterpress wood type. The other surprising blessing of the process comes from the limitations it imposes. Where on the computer, I have access to thousands of fonts; with wood

type, I only have four and within those four are limited characters. For instance, I have only one each of H and Y in my largest wood type font. Related is the artist's liberation from perfectionism driven by computer-aided design, in much the same way that a musician is freer in a live performance than in the recording studio. This also includes, however, a subsequent vulnerability that the letterpress user must face. While a new level of empowerment and control exists for the artist to influence each element in such a detailed way, there is paradoxically the inability to create an exact replica because of variations inherent in the letterpress process (Jury 86). The artist must also take risks when carving images for the press or printing type on a page. If a mistake is made, there is no "undo" command under the "Edit" menu or the "History" panel in Photoshop. Each cut in linoleum, each impression on the press, and each selection of color must be carefully considered, and the consequences of those design choices well conceived. The old carpenter's adage of "measure twice and cut once" is never more appropriate than in printmaking.

CHAPTER 3

LAYERING OF IDEAS AND INKS

The ability to render prints with multiple layers is one of the most significant advantages of using a letterpress process. Both text and images in *Points of Contention* are created with many overlapping layers of oil-based block printing ink. The overprinted layers of type hold both conceptual significance and also reference a testing process used by printmakers to assess their image before a longer run on the press, resulting in test prints called "make-readies."

In the past, these make-readies were normally of no consequence to printers and usually meant that they were conserving the paper to be used for a specific order while calibrating their press for the upcoming run. These test prints often contained overlapping, unrelated images, usually randomly placed on the page, in essence, whatever the printer needed to prepare the press. However, as aesthetics evolved, designers such as Charles Spencer Anderson and David Carson viewed these make-readies in light of similar designs by Jim Sherraden from Hatch Show Print and declared the test prints to be art and viable designs (Sherraden 137). Today, printers in studios such as Hatch Show Print, Print Mafia, and the Church of Type often sell these as one-of-a kind pieces of coincidental art at a much higher price. For these pieces, the images, text, and overlapping are never planned, but ironically and quite by chance, the image cast at some unspecified point becomes artistically interesting and valuable.

In instances where the pieces are mainly composed of type, the overlapping layers of type characters actually begin to form unique shapes that become "new" characters, which in turn create more visual interest. A comparison in fine art would be some of the works involving numbers by Jasper Johns from the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as *White Numbers* (see fig. 2)

and *0 through 9* (see fig. 3); in particular, the latter consists of large letterpress style overlapping numerals being pressed into a mold and cast in aluminum. Each number between 0 and 9 became pressed into the same image, leaving a trace of all ten numerals in the composition. I was able to view both of these works by Johns in Atlanta in early 2012 and noted a similarity to the overlapping of letterpress type in make-readies and in the backgrounds of my work. In both, the individual characters are not necessarily legible, but the forms are still present, allowing the viewer to discern the characters and numerals.

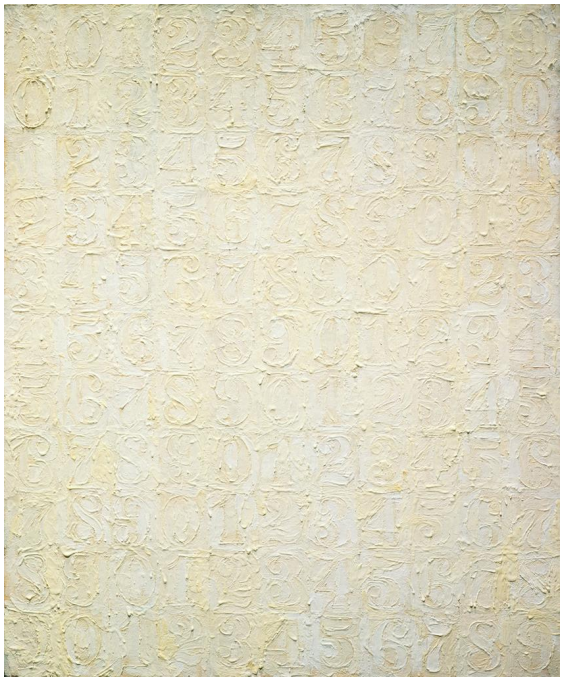

Fig. 2. Johns, Jasper (b. 1930) © VAGA, NY. *White Numbers*. 1957. Encaustic on canvas, 34 x 28 1/8" (86.5 x 71.3 cm). Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Fund. The Musuem of Modern Art. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Influenced by my many years as a graphic designer, I also choose to employ type and type characters in a similar approach. The type printed in my work, whether overlapping with

many layers or standing on its own, performs an analogous and vital function. It allows the viewer to process the piece beginning with the characters and glyphs of type as the initial reference point and provides at least some minimal visual context for the main image featured in the piece.

Fig. 3. Johns, Jasper (b. 1930) ©VAGA, NY. *0 through 9*. 1961 (cast 1966). Aluminum, 26 x 19 7/8 x 7/8" (66 x 50.2 x 2.2 cm) (irregular) The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Even as background texture, the type is still able to communicate despite apparent limitations of legibility. Designer David Carson, famous for a "grunge" aesthetic in his typographic treatments, also became known for his extreme use of overlapping computer generated type that often left

his designs unreadable. In the documentary film *Helvetica,* Carson says “Don't confuse legibility with communication. Just because something is legible doesn't mean it communicates and, more importantly, doesn't mean it communicates the right thing” (Hustwit *Helvetica*).

The experimentation with layers of text in a manner parallel to make-readies was a primary goal of my artwork as I began to explore letterpress printing. I have always been attracted to and fascinated by the coincidence of overlap between type characters of different layers. Throughout the work in *Points of Contention,* the lines of type that I used, however, were not random as in a true make-ready but conceived specifically for each piece. I printed lines of text that would express opinions from both sides of an issue, often humorous and in opposition to my personal beliefs, or from points of view that would be unpopular or possibly offensive. While this specific text appears in the piece, it is purposefully covered or ambiguously situated so that the viewer may or may not be able to discern what is there. This intentional opacity allows viewers to draw their own conclusions about the issue or sentiment presented in the work.

In addition to my work with type layers, I also experimented and made discoveries in regard to the “finish” of the inks that were being superimposed. Often, the inks would chemically react when overlapped to create glossier areas. Sometimes this occurred due to the mixture of commercial printing ink and Speedball block printing ink, but other times this special effect would be created only by Speedball ink. Regardless, the glossier region resulted in a much desired area of visual interest for me, so I strived to produce that effect whenever possible. Examples of this can be seen in the stars filtering through on the back of Stubbs the cat in *No Confidence* and the difference of the finish between the black inks and the background text of *Political Think Tank.*

But from a conceptual viewpoint, the type is not only a layering of ink, color, and finish but also a layering of ideas. This notion emerged through experimentation with my own make-readies created from *No Confidence,* which would eventually become *Remember Talkeetna*, *Alaska* and also the background of *Always on Defrost*. The text I set in wood type would express varying points of view concerning the main idea of the piece, often alongside my own satiric humor and/or personal opinion on the issue. I expanded this idea the furthest in *Comic Sans is the Devil's Handwriting*, where the entire piece is a satirical line of thought concerning the use of the Comic Sans typeface as the subject of a religious-based maxim, reminiscent of fundamentalist teachings about the evils of the innocuous, such as television and rock & roll.

Another way that I approached text was to have it be written from the point of view of different characters, each with a unique position. Through the layering process, multiple viewpoints could be presented simultaneously, creating an intriguing visual noise within the composition. As the foreground images became more detailed, such as in *Eavesdropper, Political Think Tank,* and *Building Yet Another Politician with Preacher Hair,* the layer of type, while still present and vital, evolved to colors that either blended more with the background or were printed in more neutral tones so as not to interfere as much with the main linocut image. Overall, while type remains an essential part of my artistic conceptualization, it is significant to note the evolution that it has taken during the past five years. During my early letterpress work, type occupied the main focus, with the images printed on top of it secondary. Setting and printing the type itself and ensuring that the message appeared mostly visible were the main goals. This can be seen in *No Confidence* and *Remember Talkeetna, Alaska.* But over time, images began to assume a more prominent role in my work, while type leant itself more as a vehicle for creating texture.

Finally, as an interesting juxtaposition of the roles of type and image in *Comic Sans is the Devil's Handwriting*, I created an image, a devil's face, using only wood type. This method of constructing an image owes its inspiration to Kevin Bradley, formerly of Yee-Haw Industries in Knoxville, Tennessee and currently of Church of Type in Santa Monica, California whose work I consider a significant influence on my own design work and artwork. Bradley's wood and metal type collection is massive, and with that collection of type, ornaments, and dingbats, he creates images of robots and monsters from the conglomeration of individual characters (see fig. 4). The fact that Bradley's work uses both type and monsters, two of my important inspirations, makes his work even more relevant to many of my pieces in the show.

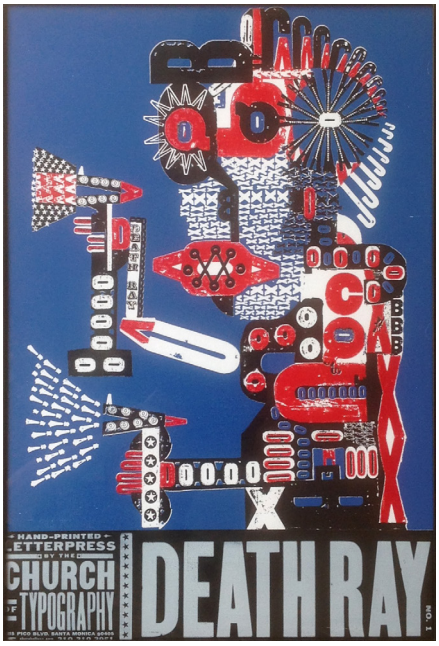

Fig. 4. Kevin Bradley, *Death Ray*. 2013.
Letterpress. 16" x 23". © Kevin Bradley. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 4

INSPIRATIONS & INFLUENCES

In his 2003 lecture "Design and Discovery," David Carson expressed what he felt would be "next" in the field of design:

> What's next? What's next is going to be people. As we get more technically driven, the importance of people becomes more than it's ever been before. You have to utilize who you are in your work. Nobody else can do that: nobody else can pull from your background, from your parents, your upbringing, your whole life experience. If you allow that to happen, it's really the only way you can do some unique work, and you're going to enjoy the work a lot more as well. ("Design and Discovery")

In a similar manner, I was able in *Points of Contention* to draw inspiration not only from the many facets of my own upbringing but also from life experiences that have shaped my attitudes and convictions personally and professionally. The result illustrates the symbiotic relationship between who we are and what we create.

Along with my early inspirations of cartoon advertising mascots, sequential comic book art, and designs by Charles Spencer Anderson and Hatch Show Print, the root concepts, sketches, and ideas that would eventually become the works in *Points of Contention* also come from many other sources, including news headlines and my subsequent reactions and feelings toward them. Sometimes, the stories would spark ideas for something odd and humorous, like the three works about Twinkies. Other times I would feel saddened and compelled to react and express myself in a visual way, as in *Minus 387*, which embodies my artistic reaction to the school shooting at

Sandy Hook, Connecticut and the heated debate about gun control in the months that followed.

Also, for many years, I have enjoyed satire and dark humor stemming from the faux news broadcasts of "Weekend Update" on NBC's *Saturday Night Live* when I was younger and more recently by Jon Stewart on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. I also read *The Onion* regularly online. This type of humor incited my own political opinions, especially during the 2012 election year where I perceived my vote as becoming less and less relevant and the candidates increasingly unworthy of my vote. Newspaper columnist and humorist Molly Ivins once said in an interview, "Satire is traditionally the weapon of the powerless against the powerful" (Green, "The Mouth of Texas," para. 15). In keeping with that sentiment, my feelings of powerlessness would shape many of the satirical works mocking politics and government in *Points of Contention.*

Related to my childhood interest in monsters and comic book creatures, I am also attracted to odd news stories, the weirder and more bizarre, the better. If the Mothman makes an appearance in West Virginia, I want to know about it. Social media provides an excellent source for this, especially in the Facebook news feed, which was where I discovered the news story about Stubbs, the mayor cat of Talkeetna, Alaska, that inspired two works in *Points of Contention*. I also listen to weird news podcasts on Darkness Radio from Minneapolis while I work in the studio. I enjoy having the noise of a speaking radio host while I work, but prefer the subject not be about politics or sports. The tales of ghosts and creatures, coupled with the sometimes outlandish radio guests, fuel the inspiration for my work. In Ray Bradbury's collection of short stories *October Country*, he describes those that are attracted to the strange, dark, or uncanny as "autumn people."

> That country where the hills are fog and the rivers are mist; where noons go

> quickly, dusks and twilights linger, and mid-nights stay…That country whose people are autumn people, thinking only autumn thoughts. (xiii)

Though I have a springtime birthday, I would consider myself one of Bradbury's autumn people. From the monster's head in a jar from *Alive!* to the corrupt robot in *Building Yet Another Politician with Preacher Hair, Points of Contention* abounds with eeriness and "autumn thoughts."

Connected to my interest in oddities and monstrosities is the concept of "monster as metaphor." Having been inspired by monsters at an early age, I have a great appreciation for Cold War era science fiction short stories from Ray Bradbury, television shows like the original *Twilight Zone*, and B movies from the 1950s that involve men from outer space or giant mutated creatures that attack cities and communities. According to movie director, Oscar winner, and monster creator Guillermo del Toro,

> They [monsters] are symbols of great power. I think that at some point, when we became thinking creatures, we decided to interpret the world by creating a mythology of gods and monsters. You know, we created angels, we created demons, we created serpents devouring the moon. We created a mythology to make sense of the world around us. (Miller, "We are Big Idea Hunters," para. 2)

In that same regard, I have created monsters and creatures in *Points of Contention* that enable me to understand and process the issues and events around me.

News Stories, Current Events, & the U.S. Government

As I watched the news in the summer of 2013, I paid close attention to information concerning the NSA scandal and how that organization was collecting and monitoring the online

and mobile device information of American citizens. To express this visually, I decided to create a creature or monster to give form to the fears and concerns that the public had about the government monitoring their location and communication. After sketching for a while, I drew a robot sphere that had cables dangling from its body that could collect bits of data from unsuspecting citizens. As the idea expanded, the sphere became a jellyfish-type creature with an "all seeing eye" that would become the mechanical monstrosity in *Eavesdropper,* whose dark and menacing tentacles would collect data and dispose of any opposition it might encounter. After *Eavesdropper,* I hoped to carry that same theme through other pieces as well. Soon after, I saw the news story about the government collecting data leaked by video games and applications such as *Angry Birds*. This provided the perfect opportunity to have the *Eavesdropper* creature confront the digital mascot from a popular game application, and so the tentacles attacked and overcame an Angry Bird in *Angry Yet?*. Eventually, the dark, tentacle-wiring concept of the *Eavesdropper* would be carried through to the robot brains of *Political Think Tank* and ultimately to inhabit a robot politician being constructed in *Building Yet Another Politician with Preacher Hair.* While these technological tentacles began as representing a breach of trust and privacy from the government, in the later works, they came to symbolize everything wrong and wary about today's government and political figures.

Really, the majority of the works in the *Points of Contention* exhibit have been inspired in some way by current events, and it is around these events and concepts that the contention element manifested, over what I perceived as political and governmental mismanagement, intrusion, and pervasive incompetence. The first examples were the two *Election Year Kayfabe* pieces based on the 2012 presidential election: *State of the Unicorn* featuring President Obama and *Magic Underpants* featuring the Republican nominee Mitt Romney. These works came

about as a reaction to the rhetoric that seems to surface every two to four years in the national and local election cycle in order to appease the faithful followers and donors of each political party and provide fodder for the ridiculous 24-hour media coverage of that rhetoric, which ultimately fails to examine the issues themselves. I became frustrated and disillusioned that neither candidate from the two major political parties addressed issues I cared about or that represented me and that voting for a third party candidate for president remained an exercise in futility. As a result, I decided to construct an odd comparison between politics and professional wrestling, where candidates maintained their support, a.k.a. fan base, by having their own prescribed, scripted story to follow and persona to present to the public. This included trash talking the opponent and making outrageous and unfounded claims to energize the crowd and the faithful.

The feeling of contention continued throughout 2012, as the more I felt disenfranchised during the election year, the more I gravitated to odd stories in the news, especially a story on Yahoo! News out of Talkeetna, Alaska about a town that had elected a cat as mayor for fifteen years. Stubbs the cat had been chosen as mayor when the public decided they could not support any of the mayoral candidates, and so the town had functioned for the past fifteen years with only a city council. *No Confidence* is a satirical election poster, hoping Stubbs would consider a presidential run during the 2012 election. *Remember Talkeetna, Alaska* is also inspired by the same thought, further expressing my view that voters should be able to vote for something they believe in and of which they are proud, instead of having to choose which of two subpar candidates would do the least harm or create the fewest problems.

The expression of anger that started with my frustration at the election process would soon emerge in other work. Only weeks after the 2012 election concluded, I heard from various

news sources that Hostess Bakeries had declared bankruptcy and would be closing, rendering those iconic Americana snack cakes, Twinkies, no longer available on store shelves. The conservative media blamed the unions, while other news outlets only covered the public's reaction to being deprived of their beloved snack cakes. As a result, I decided to work on the first of three works featuring Twinkies. This one memorialized the death of the iconic brand, and within the layers of text, called out the mismanagement from the company's leadership, the misreporting of the union involvement, and the overall indifference that 18,500 workers had lost their jobs.

Having cut the Twinkie image in linoleum, I was involved in the time-consuming process of printing the text layers for *Happy Trails, Twinkie!*, when many other artists also began releasing artistic homages to Twinkies. Among them was an artist whose work I had been studying over the past several years, Canadian illustrator Gary Taxali. His stylized, screen printed work created for the *New York Times* featured a crying Twinkie snack cake with angel wings floating toward heaven (see fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Gary Taxali, *Ode to the Twinkie*. 2012. Serigraph. © Gary Taxali. All rights reserved.

Seeing Taxali's work not only validated and encouraged my completion of *Happy Trails, Twinkie!*, but also inspired me to create a series of three: the first signifying the death, the second featuring the afterlife of the snack cake mascot, and then eventually his resurrection. The timeliness of Taxali's illustration work for the *New York Times* also inspired the continuation of work based on my interpretation of news events and as a conduit to vent my anger, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment. This led to pieces that addressed issues such as gun control in *Minus 387*, NSA collection of data from American citizens in *Eavesdropper* and *Angry Yet?*, and political stagnation and corruption in *Political Think Tank* and *Building Yet Another Politician with Preacher Hair.*

Brand Mascots

As stated in the introduction, I was fascinated as a child by brand mascots, an attraction reinforced and imprinted in my brain by advertisements. The fact that I would consider pop art involving any of these brand mascots as an influence on my work is, therefore, not surprising. One facet of the pop art movement involves the artist appropriating images of well-known products, characters, or brand logos and placing them into a new context. In this unfamiliar framework, the subject transforms from a brand spokesperson into an entity that can represent a social or political statement or deliver a specific message from the artist.

An excellent example of this concept can be seen in the work of Mississippi native and member of the Outlaw Printmakers, Sean Starwars. His energetic relief prints contain images of brand mascots and movie characters such as Darth Vader, Frankenberry, and Spider-Man. Anthropomorphic characters that are food themselves, such as ice cream cones and hot dogs, also

frequently make an appearance in his work. In his artist statement from an exhibit at Blackbird Studios in Las Vegas in 2011, Starwars states:

> My goal is to create an environment where various icons of consumer culture can simultaneously react to one another and function as vital components in my visual narrative. While my first love is the relief print, whichever media I am engaged in, my primary concern is to create a string visual infused with a sense of satirical humor. In other words, I like to tell funny stories using funny pictures. (Blackbird Studios, para.7)

Sean Starwars's work, especially *Frankenberry vs The Klan* from 1996 (see fig. 6), greatly influenced my work. *Frankenberry vs The Klan* can be interpreted in several ways: as a struggle against southern stereotypes, a battle between a creature or person who is different and those who are enraged by this difference, or just simply a southern retelling of the final scene from the classic 1931 *Frankenstein* film when the villagers chase after Frankenstein's monster with torches. This four-color relief print by Starwars, with its rebellious attitude, use of a breakfast cereal mascot, and clever satire, captured my attention on many fronts. It jolted me awake as an artist and also made me laugh. Although at the time, I was not sure what direction my art would take, I knew I wanted to create work that could achieve the same response from my audience.

Fig. 6. Sean Starwars, *Frankenberry vs. The Klan*. 2013 Recut. Woodcut. 20 x 30”.

As a result, many of the works in *Points of Contention* depict popular culture and brand icons in a similar manner. Twinkie the Kid, a bird from a video game, an ICEE frozen drink, and even the celebrity cat from Alaska appear as symbols that the audience will recognize and then use as an entry point into viewing and interpreting the work.

CHAPTER 5

TECHNICAL PROCESS

During my first year of graduate school, I attempted to approach the letterpress aesthetic from the digital side of design by trying to recreate the letterpress experience using design software, which suited my area of expertise and comfort zone. I thought this process would work for me because there are hundreds of typefaces that imitate the look of letterpress wood type by digitally replicating the wear and dents on antique wood type. But eventually, I began to embrace a slightly different set of rules for the placement of type, not entirely dissimilar, but more of a mental shift away from the perfection expected in contemporary digital design. The most noticeable difference involved kerning, the adjustment of space between specific type characters to create a more unified viewing without the visual distractions of negative space. The digital type had to be approached as if it were an actual wood block character, unable to be carved or adjusted. Another significant change related to leading, the space between lines of type. I discovered through trial and error that leading had to be treated as if the spaces were being formed and simultaneously limited by the shape of woodblock type.

Using this new set of guidelines, I attempted to create a series of posters but ultimately felt dissatisfied and conflicted about creating a mere simulation of the medium I wanted to experience. Fortunately during this time, the Nashville chapter of AIGA partnered with Hatch Show Print to offer a day of letterpress printing using wood relief blocks from the Hatch collection and led by curator and artist Jim Sherraden. As mentioned previously, this workshop initiated a major turning point for me creatively and technically, and even after gaining only the

most basic hands-on experience, I knew I wanted to work with letterpress type and pursue a printmaking approach to graphic design.

After the Hatch Show Print workshop, I started to search for a set of wood letterpress type to purchase, eventually determining that online eBay auctions were the most affordable and offered the best variety. I purchased my first wood typeface in April 2011, a 3.5" tall gothic bold sans-serif typeface from a seller in Toronto. The manufacturer of the blocks is unknown, as there was no company mark pressed into the wood, but fortunately this set had almost all of the uppercase letters of the alphabet and a few pieces of punctuation. As soon as the type blocks arrived, I immediately used them for a mixed media project. For this first attempt, since I had little experience in relief printing processes, I pressed each of the letters by hand into the composition, even sometimes using a spoon to press the character into the paper.

Around the same time as these initial explorations with letterpress wood type, I also began to create imagery for my work by carving images in relief into linoleum and using the East Tennessee State University etching press to print them. At first, I attempted to combine relief printed images with digital imagery by scanning the relief print and adding the image to a digital composition. I eventually moved away from this approach, and although digital imagery occasionally appeared in a piece, my focused shifted to the process of drawing and carving images by hand.

Along with working in a different medium for imagery, I was quickly learning the limitations of only having one typeface, and a somewhat incomplete one at that. Although I had one block for every letter in the alphabet, spelling words required the repeating of vowels and consonants. Especially bothersome was that this typeface included only one "H" and one "Y." In

addition to that challenge, I had to learn how to work with only 3.5" tall bold type, when as a designer I had access to hundreds of digital fonts of various styles, weights, and sizes.

Fortunately in 2012, I was able to purchase a second wood typeface. This set was manufactured by Hamilton Wood Type in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, the most well-known and respected manufacturer of wood type in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The new purchase was a similar type design to the first font I had purchased, a gothic bold, but at about half the height. That same year, I purchased a large bin of unsorted "pied" wood type, consisting of many incomplete typefaces. After sorting through the bin, I discovered one nearly complete font and many numbers and pieces of punctuation that would allow much more freedom in my artwork. Then in 2014, I purchased another font from a seller in Buenos Ares, Argentina, this time a smaller, thinner weight gothic condensed font. Besides the joy of collecting these historic pieces of type, I was thrilled with how each new acquisition allowed more versatility and more creative options in my artwork.

Carving out a workspace at home, in addition to amassing the requisite equipment, posed another challenge in adopting the letterpress style. I eventually set up a studio area downstairs at a work table in my garage, and once the initial sketching out of ideas phase ended, then this workshop would be the center of the cutting activity. But first, for the primary images in my compositions, I start by sketching ideas with a pencil in a small sketchbook that I carry with me. Most of my rough drawings would just consist of major shapes and shaded areas, with details and textures being added at the cutting stage. Ideas can originate with a simple word or theme, often from new stories, political satire, or current events, and evolve from that starting point. I write those words and themes in my sketchbook, and over time draw images that align with a particular word, phrase, or idea. Occasionally, like in the piece featuring Twinkie the Kid, the

process works in reverse. I sketch images or visual ideas that I want to apply to a story, and over time, I match the image with a larger concept. Once the final drawing is achieved, I trace over the image with soft graphite. For the two large pieces, *Political Think Tank* and *Building Yet Another Politician with Preacher Hair,* I had the original 5" x 7" sketch enlarged to the desired size and then did the tracing. For the text that appears in the background of my images, the process happens similarly. A phrase that conveys the representative idea or theme, or that I find humorous or controversial, might appear in the background. Often I like to include opinions and phrases from other "characters" or points of view and allow those to overlap in the background textures.

After mapping out the main visual areas, I transfer the graphite image to battleship gray linoleum and coat the image on the linoleum with black India ink. The graphite remains visible underneath the ink, with the dark shade of the ink allowing me to begin the highlights of the composition. Carving linoleum is a reductive process, much like sculpting, in which the artist cuts away material to create the image instead of adding material to the paper to produce the composition. While a time consuming process, I enjoy the marking systems that are necessary for revealing the image and making highlights from a dark background. Most of the carvings in my work were created over several hours each day for a span of two to three weeks, depending on their size and complexity. As my projects increased in dimension and intricacy over a period of four years, so did the laborious nature of the process.

After completing each carving, I trim the excess linoleum from the edges and adhere the remaining image onto wood with wood glue. I had tried over the course of a few semesters to forego mounting the linocut on wood but found that during the printing process, the linoleum

formed a wave as it went through the etching press. This would cause the ink to smear on the paper, and those prints would have to be discarded.

Once these initial steps were completed, the actual printing process for the pieces in *Points of Contention* became the most daunting challenge. Since East Tennessee State University no longer owns a letterpress, I had to develop my own technique for printing with antique wood type on a flatbed etching press, which required research into modern printing. To understand letterpress printing techniques and terminology, I began by reading *A 21st Century Guide to the Letterpress Business* by Marty Brown and consulted briarpress.com, one of the main online communities and resources for letterpress printing information. I also visited several letterpress shops, including Hammerpress in Kansas City, Missouri. The printers there were quite helpful and allowed me to tour the print shop and see their type collection and works in progress. A week later, as mentioned before, I attended a one-day workshop at Hatch Show Print where I asked Jim Sherraden many questions and also printed with some of the antique art blocks in the Hatch collection. Sherraden demonstrated how he used traditional printmaking tools to create his own monoprints and artwork. His method of marking the paper with brayers and ink was quite interesting, especially with older brayers that had ink accidently dried on them. During the process of rolling the ink onto the paper, these damaged brayers would leave a pattern. He asked all of the participants to try it by rolling the ink on to the paper on an irregular surface, such as the hardwood floors of the Hatch Show Print shop itself. Though I would eventual develop my own way of rolling the ink directly on the paper, his technique made its way into all of the work in *Points of Contention*.

Along with visiting letterpress studios, I also attended a 2012 conference in Asheville, North Carolina held by Ladies of Letterpress. Though much of the workshop revolved around

daily production technique and the craft side of running a letterpress business, I met many vendors who sell letterpress supplies and inks and discovered that paper mills now produce specifically for the letterpress market due to its resurgence in popularity.

Through all this research and experimentation, I developed a system to use wood type on university's etching press. First, after choosing the words and setting the type, I had to build a makeshift chase or frame to hold the type in place as it rolled through the press. The solution became using pieces of wood that measured shorter than the height of the type and taping them in place with masking tape. The wood pieces would be placed on all four sides of each line of type to secure it. For leading, I used cut pieces of 1/8" or 1/4" square dowel to create the space in between the lines of type, using multiples if more space was needed. For kerning, I made my own reglets by using very thin strips of balsa wood, which I would cut to the height of the type and place between each letter. This became necessary since, on the majority of the wood type I own, the design of each character goes completely to the edge of the wood block. As with the leading, I would use multiple pieces if the design required extra spacing.

Another issue to resolve involved my makeshift chase, which unlike an actual letterpress, could not be locked down and carried to another location. The type would only be set for that particular press run and then had to be dismantled. In the case of *Comic Sans is the Devil's Handwriting*, the setup was so complicated that it took several days to fix the design in place. As a solution, I devised a system where the type that created the devil's head was set on top of a thin piece of plywood and then taped into place so the design could remain intact and portable.

Overall, although the carving and printing process remains extremely time consuming compared to digital design, this labor intensive process is also rewarding, often more so than

working on a commercial design project at the computer. David Jury the author of *Letterpress: The Allure of the Handmade* describes this type of reward when writing about introducing letterpress technology to computer design students:

> It means the student can concentrate on the basic requirements of visual communication rather than attempting to produce an equivalent of commercial graphic design. Indeed, the working methodology will provide an entirely different perspective. Working within uncharted territory can be a huge aid to creativity, providing opportunities to develop new creative strategies for the practice of design. (Jury 130)

Creating work by hand and returning to the process of sketching out an idea, carving it into linoleum, and printing it along with type has been an adventure. The process has provided a much needed change in my point of view and approach to designing and creating artwork. As a designer who has used a computer to do commercial work for over eighteen years, I have finally embraced the sense of risk in carving an image where there are no "undo" key commands and that has made all of the difference to me as an artist.

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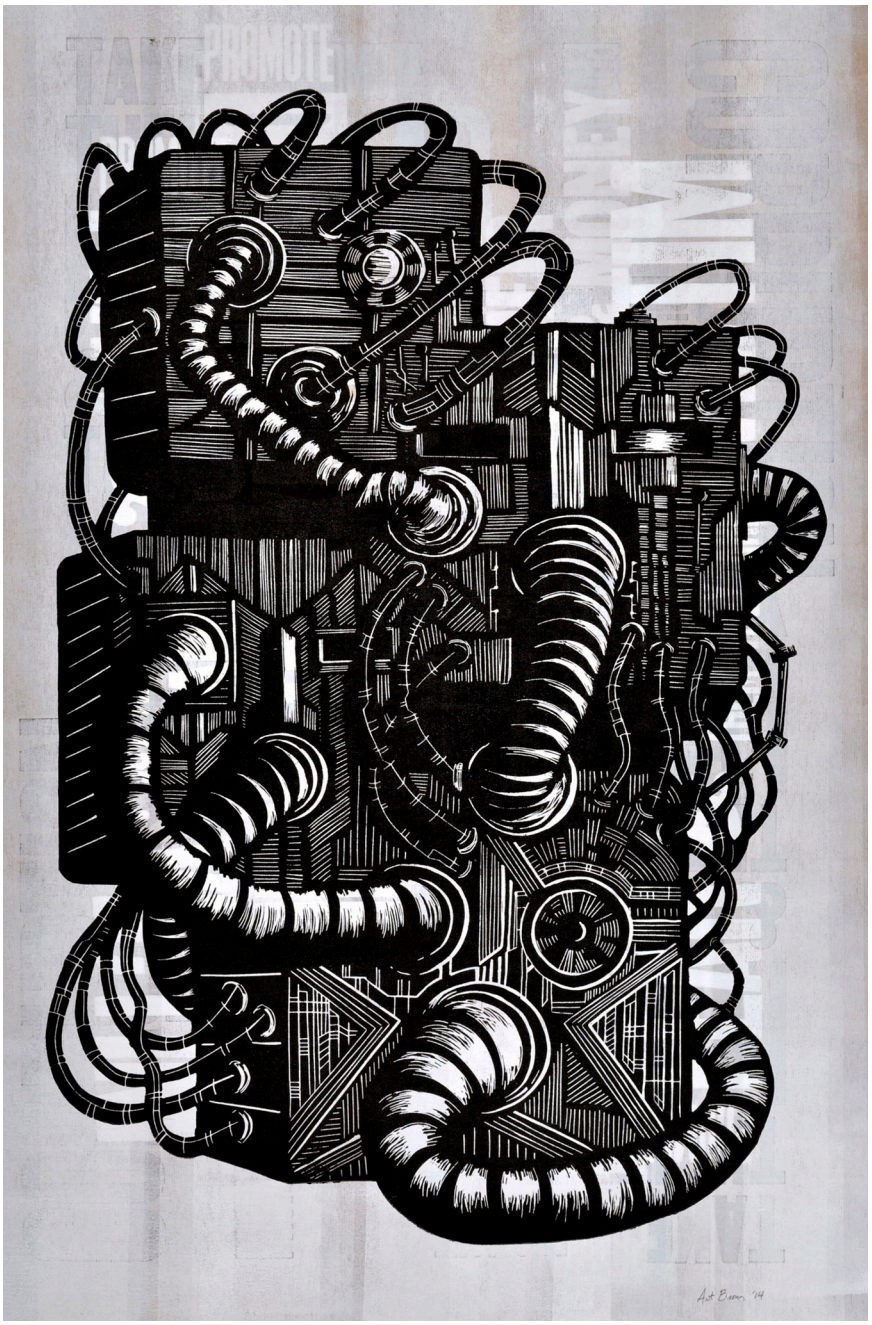
APPENDIX: CATALOGUE OF EXHIBITION

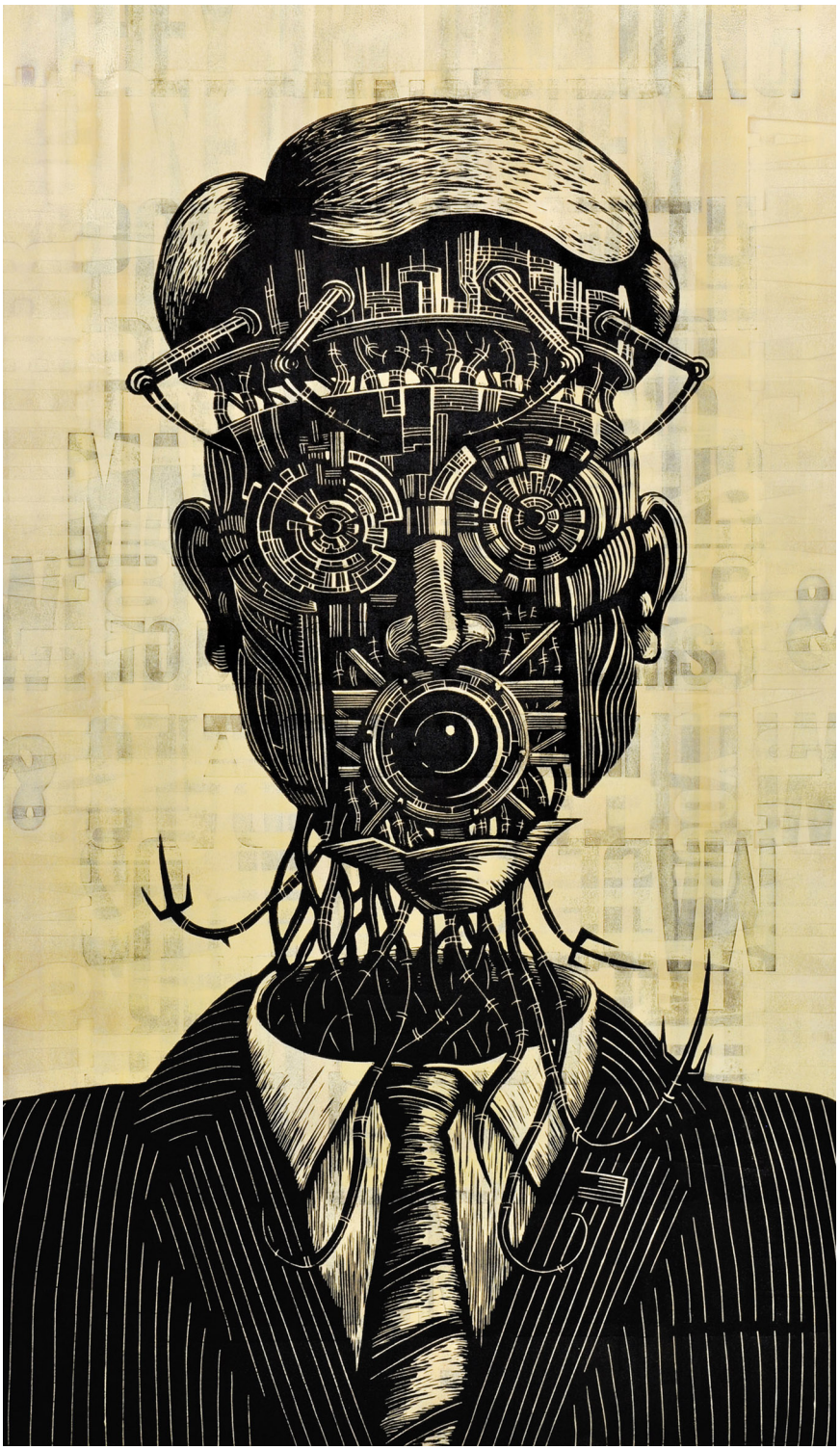
Installation of *Points of Contention: Oddities, Delicacies, & Monstrosities*
at Tipton Gallery, 126 Spring Street, Johnson City, Tennessee.
September 2-26, 2014.

Eavesdropper, Relief and Letterpress, 26” x 40”, 2013

Angry Yet?, Relief and Letterpress, 18” x 40”, 2014



Political Think Tank, Relief and Letterpress, 22” x 34”, 2014



Building Yet Another Politician With Preacher Hair, Relief and Letterpress, 22” x 40”, 2014

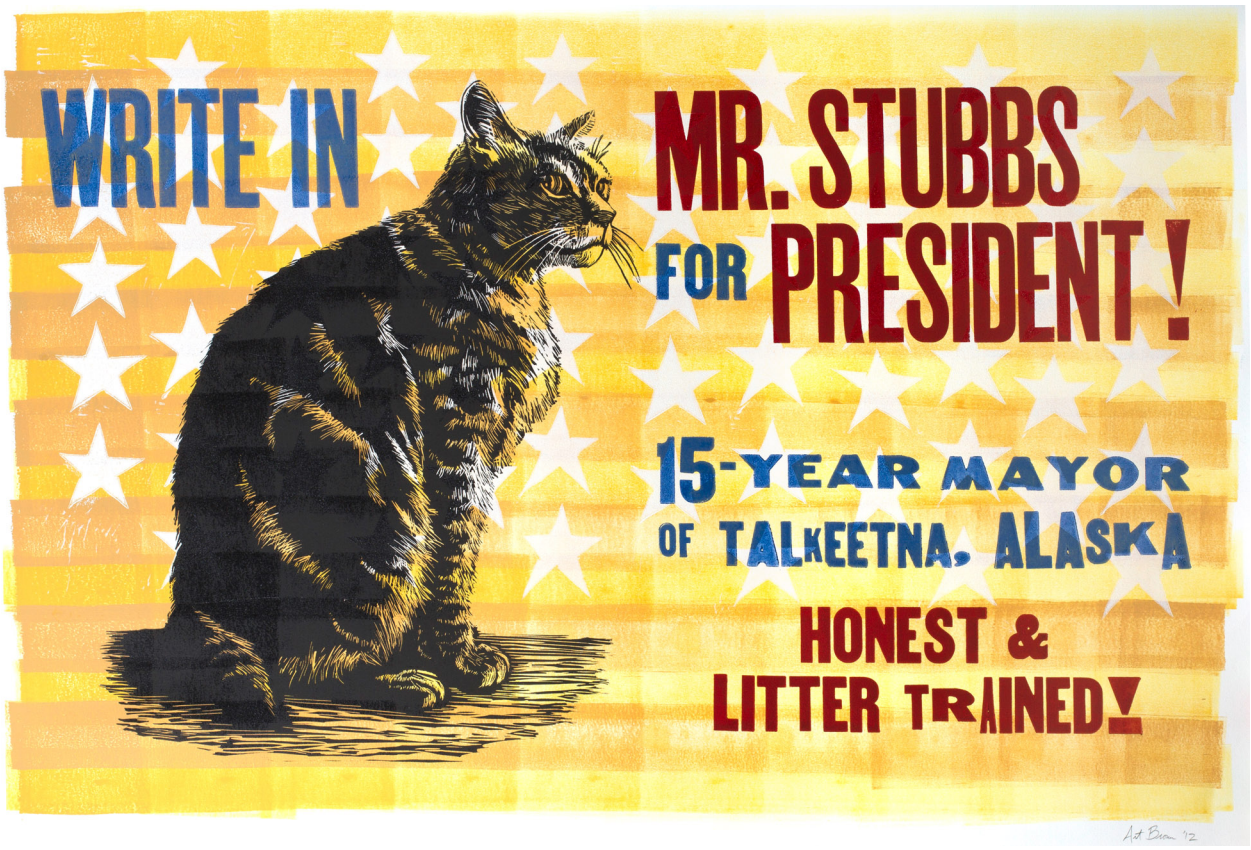
Happy Trails, Twinkie!, Relief and Letterpress, 22” x 30”, 2012

Little Debbie, Full of Grace: Twinkie's Prayer in Purgatory, Relief and Letterpress, 19" x 40", 2013

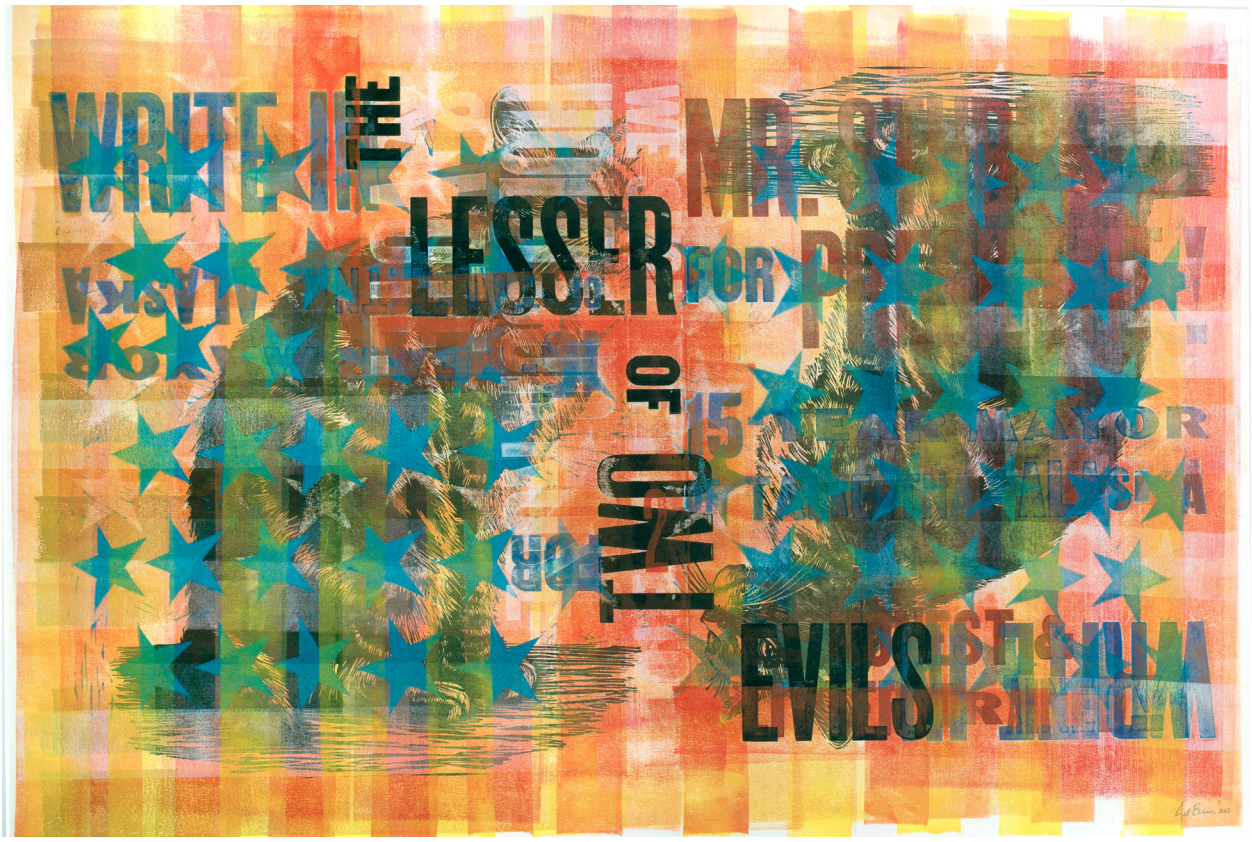
Twinkie Resurrection, Relief and Letterpress, 22” x 25”, 2013

Minus 387, Relief and Letterpress, 22” x 30”, 2013

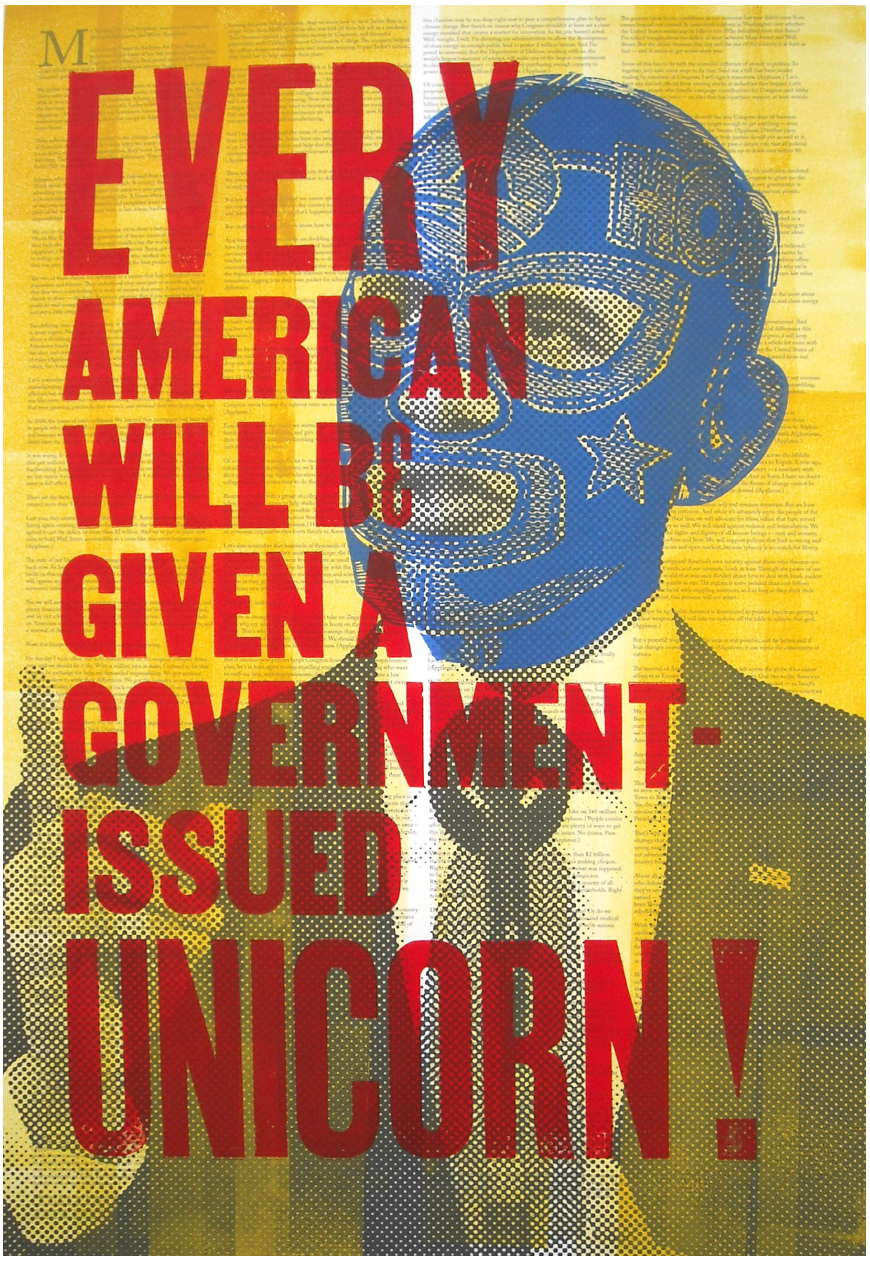
Comic Sans Is The Devil's Handwriting, Letterpress, 26" x 40", 2013



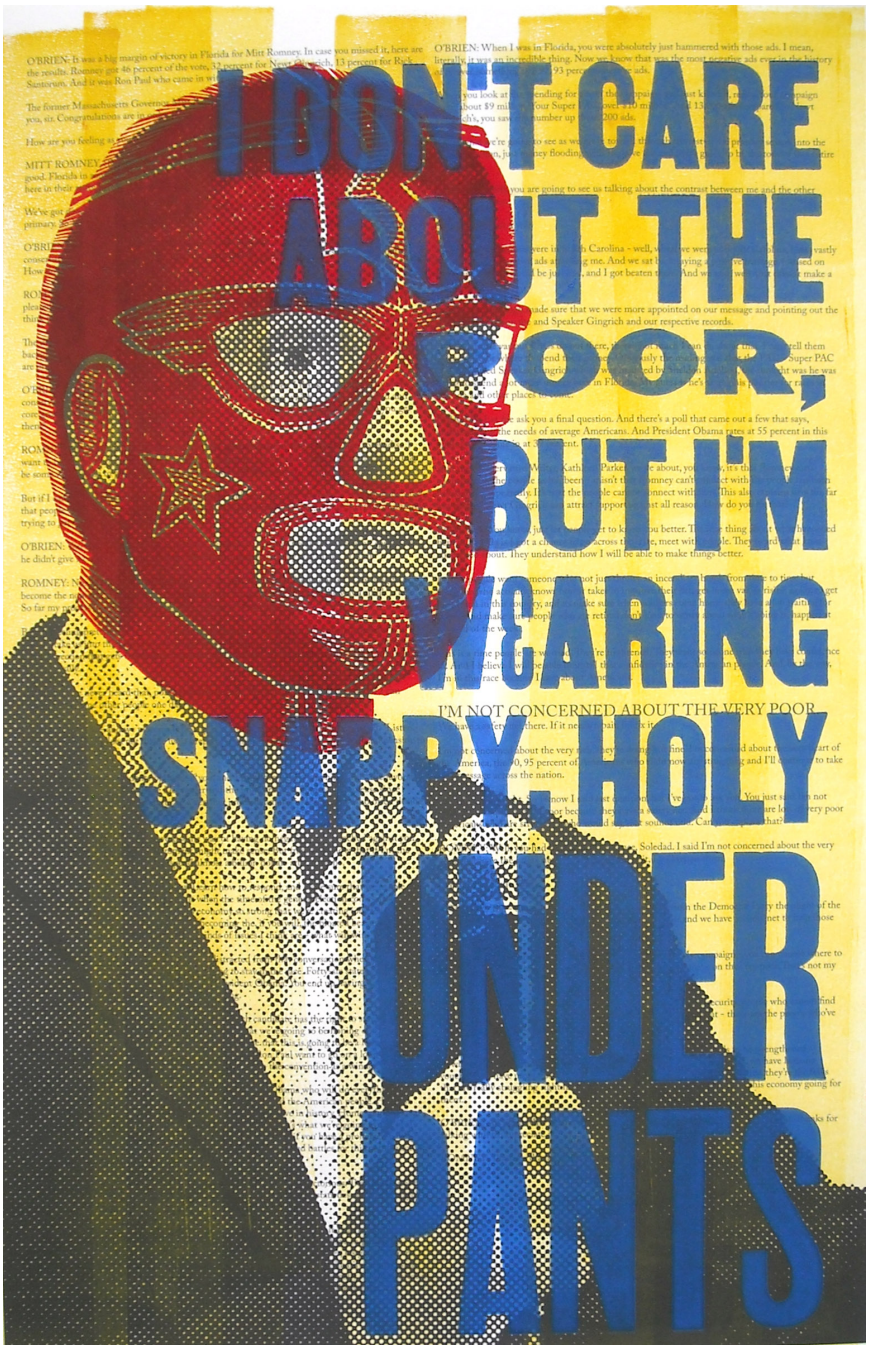
No Confidence, Relief and Letterpress, 26” x 40”, 2012



Remember Talkeetna, Alaska, Relief and Letterpress, 26” x 40”, 2012



Election-Year Kayfabe: State of the Unicorn, Relief, Letterpress, and Digital Media, 15” x 22”, 2012



Election-Year Kayfabe: Magic Underpants, Relief, Letterpress, and Digital Media, 15" x 22", 2012

Alive!, Relief and Letterpress, 15” x 22”, 2011

Always On Defrost, Relief and Letterpress, 22” x 30”, 2012

VITA

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"Points of Contention: Oddities, Delicacies, & Monstrosities"
MFA Exhibit*, 2014
Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee

"Art of Visual Communication"
ETSU Graphic Design Alumni Exhibit
Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2014

"Diverge" Annual MFA Group Exhibit
Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2014

"Constant Connection" Online Juried Exhibition
Linus Galleries, Los Angeles, California, 2014

"The FL3TCH3R Exhibit: Social and Politically Engaged Art"
National Juried Exhibition, Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2013

"Ascension" Annual MFA Group Exhibit
Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2013

"New APP: Contemporary Art In Appalachia"
Gallery of International Pavilion, Ulsan University, South Korea, 2012

"Listen" Annual MFA Group Exhibit
Tipton Gallery, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2012

Logo design published in *LogoLounge Volume 6: 2,000 International Identities by Leading Designers* by Rockport Publishers, 2011

Honors and Awards:

Outstanding MFA Student, ETSU Department of Art and Design, 2013-14

Gold and Silver TCPRA Awards, Collateral Materials
Tennessee College Public Relations Association, 2012

Gold ADDY Awards, Collateral Materials
American Advertising Federation Northeast Tennessee, 2012

Regional Gold ADDY Award, Mixed Media Local Campaign
American Advertising Federation District 7, 2010

Gold ADDY Award, Interactive Design
American Advertising Federation Knoxville, 2008

ADDY Best of Show, Print
American Advertising Federation Northeast Tennessee, 2005